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# Moral Economies of Food in Cuba

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# **Moral Economies of Food in Cuba**

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## **Abstract**

The way people produce, exchange and consume food in Cuba is underwritten by cultural and political economic rules as well as economic self-interest. These “rules” are not just formed from the top down, but also from the bottom up, though, as I will explain in this paper, norms established by what I call the national moral economy often give cultural form to local practices of food provisioning. Despite extreme scarcities in the early 1990s and continuing difficulties obtaining food in the present dual economy, Cubans often frame farming and household provisioning in terms of the national moral economy. The latter is, in turn, structured by values that have developed in Cuba over time such as asceticism and hard work.

**Keywords:** moral economies, values, commodities, entitlements, consumption, provisioning

## **Introduction**

In this paper I focus on the contrast between food as a commodity that can be valued in terms of price or exchange value, and food as an entitlement (Sen 1981), which cannot. Ideas and values about what can and cannot be commoditized, when, for example, “community membership supersedes price as a basis of entitlement” (Thompson 1993 [1971]: 338, footnote 2), are what Edward Palmer Thompson called moral economies. Moral economies hinge on historical and cultural patterns formed when political economic models of state or market meet local schemes of value, and vice versa.

The association between economic processes and the creation of value is especially clear in regards to food, which, given its centrality to social life, has long been a subject of anthropological analysis. Audrey Richards, the first anthropologist to engage in a detailed ethnographic study of food and culture, understood the special characteristics of food in its commodity form:

[F]ood stands in a different category from the ordinary commodities of economic exchange. It is an insistent human want, occurring regularly at short intervals, and shared by the whole community alike ... [I]t is the mechanism by which food-getting habits are formed in the structure of each different culture that we have to analyze. (Richards 1932: 14–15)

While anthropologists have long associated food habits with other cultural forms, they have also found that social uses of food do not always reflect unidirectional flows of value from one domain of life to another. In continuing the sociological project initiated by Mauss (1954 [1925]) and rekindled by Polanyi (2001 [1944]) and his followers, in this paper I attempt to re-link embedded aspects of society with the more limited domains delineated by political economic models, including our own. I do so by considering the way dominant ideas are consolidated in Cuban history, the “residual” (Dumont 1980 [1966]: 38-9) forms of which shape everyday practices.

The paper is split into three parts. In the first I review the anthropological literature on food provisioning and economic or other value(s), situating Cuba within this theoretical setting. In the second part, I continue along these lines, drawing from historical contexts of value-formation in Cuba to outline the contours and contradictions of its national moral economy. In the final part, I use ethnographic examples to show how the national moral economy in Cuba shapes the production, exchange and consumption of foodstuffs on the ground (the local moral economy of provisioning). I use qualitative evidence from Tuta, a rural village in Cuba (which I have renamed, along with its inhabitants) where I conducted ethnographic fieldwork for fifteen months from 2005 to 2007, returning for another month during the summer of 2011.

### **Provisioning Processes and Value-formation in Changing Economies**

Studies in economic anthropology have largely involved just one economic step in the “provisioning path” (Fine and Leopold 1993), e.g. consumption. This narrowing of focus has, however, often led the anthropologist to base analysis on assumptions embedded in his or her own value system. For instance, Marcel Mauss’s (1954 [1925]) exclusive interest in exchange stemmed in part from his ties to the French Marxist tradition. As Marilyn Strathern (1999: 139) notes, Mauss’s interest in exchange was the product of his situated position as a

revolutionary socialist and the manager of a consumer cooperative in France. As did Maurice Bloch a decade earlier (Bloch 1989: 176), Strathern refers to the central idea of exchange in anthropology as arising from Mauss's political concern about the alienation of property in capitalism (Strathern 1999: 139).

More recently, and in a similar vein, much attention in anthropology has been given to non-market, localized aspects of consumption (e.g. Friedman 1994; Weiss 1996; Miller 1994, 2001), which have again tended to overshadow wider symbolic and material *processes* of provisioning such as the intentions and values of producers. Susan Narotsky (2005) has asserted that studies which focus entirely on the consumer end disregard the "complex ways that power and interest can shape a provisioning chain" (Narotsky 2005: 81). Over fifteen years ago, sociologists Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold made a similar point, insisting that consumption of any commodity is "contingent upon, if not determined by, the production, distribution and circulation of *value*" (Fine and Leopold 1993: 255; emphasis added).

The anthropology of consumption has too often ignored important work on the political economy of commodity flows (e.g. Mintz 1985; Watts 1999), as well as anthropologies and geographies of value and money,<sup>1</sup> key analytical tools for deciphering how, when and *what kinds of* valuations historically emerge and change in particular places. Even cultural perspectives on the biographies of commodities (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986; Cook 2004) sometimes consider only what happens from the checkout to the home (Miller 2001). Studies such as *The Dialectics of Shopping* (Miller 2001 – I would prefer 'ibid.' for these), for example, openly disregard more profound political economic and cultural processes of value-formation, which occur before the commodity reaches the megastore, or even before the megastore itself became a requisite for the "good" London housewife. Indeed, while Miller's consideration of "our labor of love" in shopping (Miller 2001: 53) follows the Maussian tradition of revealing the "universal" (Miller 2001: 53) link between persons and objects, he deliberately (Miller 2001: 2) leaves out wider historical and political economic issues that relate people to commodities, which may have clarified how norms of the market have come to define London shoppers as *persons* in the first place. Such blind spots in analyses allow the market to creep in through the back door: "exchange creates value rather than people," and the fetishism of commodities becomes a methodological principle (Gregory 1997: 44).

Following critical approaches to value in economic anthropology, in this paper I argue that local rules for provisioning in Cuba are related to historical determinations of appropriate economic action, some of which stem from a wider community (e.g. the nation state), some from the market. Finding oneself in the protected position of a tourist, a visitor to Cuba rarely has the opportunity to understand the bigger picture in which *both* state and market are embedded. Fortunately, the boundaries which separate tourist and Cuban, market and state spheres (Bohannan 1955, 1959) of economic activity were partially lifted for me during the fieldwork period. The visa I obtained was not that for an academic visitor, nor was it a tourist visa. Instead, I was entitled to a family visa, officially and locally legitimated by a fictitious kinship relationship with my Cuban “parents”—friends I had known since my first visit in 2002 and who had decided that this would be the best way for me to gain official approval to stay in their “humble” household.

Being accepted (to some extent) as a legitimate insider in an area relatively isolated from obvious contrasts between Cuban and tourist provisioning spheres (as opposed to those witnessed daily by Habaneros), I discovered a world in which economic action was far from a direct reflection of rules embedded in Cuban communism and other either/or scenarios (Shanin 1990: 86–91) that separate state and market.

### **State and Market in Cuba: The Historical Formation of the National Moral Economy**

Historical representations of Cuban society, such as the national “fight” (*lucha*) to re-gain “our” land and its products from mercenary power-holders and the Guevarian vision of the “New Men” of socialism who secure collective “needs” through work effort (see below), have, in part, been reactions to the self-interested idea of “man” as depicted in the market model. In the post-1959 period, such historical formations became linked to a socialist version of “morality as asceticism” (Dumont 1977: 76), according to which inalienable goods for all, such as basic alimentary necessities, were officially valued over superfluous commodities and profits. According to such moral rules set by the Cuban state, which I call the national moral economy, provisioning at the local level must coincide with the “General Welfare” (Myrdal 1953: 16) of the community, a premise not unlike that of the market model, as I argue elsewhere (Wilson, in press). In the communist model, however, all property (e.g. food produced by individual farmers) that satisfies the general welfare of the collective is treated as

*social* property rather than individual property, and thus should be redistributed from the national center to individual citizens in accordance with their work effort and state-defined needs. Below I show that geopolitical conditions and iconographic representations of José Martí and Ernesto “Che” Guevara not only worked to establish borders around post-1959 Cuba as a national community, but opened the way to cultural assessments of value, which are, as I show in the succeeding sections, still reflected in everyday provisioning practices.

Like other plantation-based societies in the Caribbean, Cuba emerged from colonialism as a bipolar society, with both affinity and aversion to metropolitan capital, commodities and values. A strong counter-hegemonic system surfaced in late nineteenth and twentieth-century Cuba to resist US domination. During and after the War of Independence (1895–98; callously or ignorantly called the Spanish-American War by some), the landowning classes were replaced by businessmen, merchants and other groups tied to the sugar industry, as Cuba became increasingly dominated by US interests. The other part of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Cuban society was comprised of petty traders, service workers and “reconstituted” peasants (Mintz 1961: 31–4; e.g. *colonos* or sugar-cane sharecroppers). In the second half of the nineteenth century, many of the latter had moved to rural areas, especially to the coffee and pasture lands of the east, returning to their farms when Spanish General Weyler’s ruthless reconcentration campaign to relocate rural settlements finally ended after the War of Independence. Yet independence it was not, and the resulting “stillbirth” (Guerra 2005: 3) of the republic led to heightened divisions between a large section of the population under the puppet strings of US policies and personalities, and another section united if only in their resistance to dominance by outsiders.

Polarities between Cuba as a *place* for Cubans and Cuba as an economic *space* that could be bought and sold, had been evident since the second half of the 19th century when the impersonal “factory central system” (Mintz 1956: 337) superseded the paternalist plantation model. The bifurcation of Cuban society continued into the twentieth century, characterized by a rent-seeking and largely corrupt political and economic elite dependent on the “benevolent” hand of the United States, on the one hand, and a heterogeneous group of counter-hegemonic forces, on the other. Indeed, according to Lilian Guerra, Cuba’s national “creation myth” (Guerra 2005: 7) is symbolized by the mythical figure of José Martí, whose writings were based on a moral contrast between the dependency and greed of individuals, and

autonomy and justice of the nation and of Latin America as a whole. The influential writings of Martí, the Cuban poet and hero who was killed in the War of Independence, perpetuated the idea that the Cuban nation was united in its “defense” against outside economic interests, a depiction that extended to race as well as class: “A Cuban is more than white, more than mulatto, more than black ... In the daily life of defense, loyalty, brotherhood, and attack, at the side of every white man there has always been a Negro” (Martí 1977: 29).

In the twentieth century, moralistic writings by Cuban social scientists largely focused on national polarities between internal and external economies, or between the upper and middle classes who mainly resided in Havana (though many owned land in the countryside) and the poorer rural classes in most other areas of Cuba. In Cuban historiography, for example, the contrast was depicted as that between “nation” and “plantation” (Martinez-Alier 1977: 125 – turns out it’s only referred to on one page rather than a whole chapter) in the nineteenth century, or between *conciencia* (conscience) and *existencia* (existence) (Martí 1959) in the twentieth. Such binarism became a key tool for Cuban nationalism, and was later used by Fidel Castro and his confidant, Ernesto “Che” Guevara, to defend the communist cause and later, political calls for food sovereignty.

Like Martí, Guevara was able to incorporate nearly all the political and cultural codes that had characterized Cuba as a nation with a “definable tradition of political dissent” (Kapcia 1997: 25–6). And, like earlier Cuban intellectuals, Guevara and his followers adopted a kind of “revolutionary ethics,” which challenged the “economic rationality” (Silverman 1971: 3) of the United States and Cuban elites. Guevara’s calls for moral over material incentives in what Ernest Mandel called the Great Debate of 1963–5 (Silverman 1971: 1) not only upset more market-based plans for the Cuban economy, but were also continuous with a certain kind of Cuban nationalism that developed from the time of José Martí. In line with Martí’s writings, Guevara’s model for society called for men and women to become “cultured” through values such as hard work and self-sacrifice rather than via increased access to metropolitan commodities. In the process, they were seen as becoming “New Men” of socialism—:

It is not a question of how many kilograms of meat are eaten or how many pretty imported things can be bought with present wages. It is rather that the individual feels greater fulfillment [in work], that he has greater inner wealth and many more



responsibilities in our country, the individual knows that the glorious period in which it has fallen to him to live is one of sacrifice. (Guevara 1971: 352)

The most influential model of the Cuban economy in the post-1959 period was based on a subordination of individual desires for collective entitlements, such as centralized food distribution. Indeed, in the post-1959 period, historical values initiated by Martí became linked to a kind of “morality as asceticism” (Dumont 1977: 79), according to which inalienable goods for all, such as basic alimentary necessities, became officially valued over superfluous commodities and profits. From the early 1960s to the early 1990s, this value system evolved in conjunction with a centralized economy, which aligned work effort with peso salaries, which could, in turn, buy a limited selection of basic foodstuffs. As this system depended on the internal control of goods as well as money, pesos (valued on par with the US dollar) worked as tokens used to buy state-defined necessities rather than money to purchase an unimaginable array of commodities (Holbraad 2000: 9).

Before the legalization of hard currency (US dollars) in 1993 (converted to the Cuban convertible dollar, CUC, in 1998), the communist model seemed to function in Cuba as intended, if one ignores the periodic specter of the black market. Farmers and the state maintained a barter-like relationship (exchanging in kind), just as workers labored for state tokens used to buy provisions. In a sense, food and household items represented money or wealth during this period.

The situation in post-1993 Cuba is drastically different. Food is now a commodity, competing with its role as an entitlement in the state’s value system. Very low daily wages (approx 10 pesos, or \$0.52) earned in highly-devalued pesos (1 peso = 1/24 CUCs) are still exchanged for staple items intermittently available through the state subsidized system, such as rice and soap. Food commodities like higher quality rum and wine are sold in hard currency, their prices set largely by supply and demand. These luxury items are only available to privileged Cubans with access to CUCs. The CUC’s value is—in theory if not in practice—determined entirely by its exchange value, as set against global dollar exchange rates. The Cuban peso’s value rests on an entirely different value system: that of hard work and asceticism.

## **The Local Moral Economy of Provisioning: Ethnographic Examples**

I have argued that the Cuban economy is linked not only to a global market driven by individual preferences and rules of supply and demand, but also to a national value system: the product of Cuba's particular political and intellectual history. While Cubans have partly incorporated the consumerist culture of their powerful northern neighbor, they are also influenced by ideas that have shaped Cuban society over time. As I found in my research, Cubans (like most other people) have "multiple, conflicting social identifications" (Davis 2004: 14, in reference to Folbre 1994 – added to references), only some of which conform to the idea of the individual maximizing his personal benefits in the market. Below I provide ethnographic examples of food provisioning processes in Tuta, starting with production and ending with consumption. Despite my analytical distinctions, we shall see that these economic arenas are interrelated in practice.

### **Production**

As Sir Henry Maine noted in 1861, property and ownership are always embedded in the "total range of rights and obligations" (Benda-Beckmann 2006: 17, in reference to Gluckman 1965 – added to references) of any particular society. People with land in Cuba must balance their rights: partial subsistence, credit, technical and other social assistance—*notably more significant rights than those of many other smallholders in Latin America and the world*—with the moral obligation to work the land to meet the alimentary needs of society. Such was true not only for *campesinos* (peasants) and workers in the early years of the revolution, but also for recipients of land under the latest two agrarian reforms, in the period of 1993–6 and presently (from July 2008 to the date of writing, December 2011), as plots of land are distributed to Cubans in usufruct to produce food for their families and for sale (see Funes *et al.* 2002; Wright 2008). Driven by a political drive for food sovereignty (as well as economic necessity), the current rise in domestic food production is not only a great benefit for traders, but also for smallholders whom I have already noted as better off than most other people in society: "I don't know what the people do in town who do not have land like I do. I am old [90 years old], but I still work the land for food."

As I found during fieldwork, it was not just communist norms that prompted people to work in agriculture for social ends, as illustrated by Eduardo's farming family, who received

land from the Cuban state in 1993.<sup>3</sup> Eduardo's wife or *mujer*, Mariela, emphasized social over monetary aspects of their farming business. One day she expressed her anger with a woman who had come to the house to buy produce. While the woman who had visited *could* have brought milk from her family's goat as a gift to Eduardo's family, which would have been exchanged for produce, the woman was "stupid" as she brought only money. Mariela stressed that they always preferred to help others with what they produced, and were happy when people brought items of use to the family. In her terms: "it is not money, it is the feeling one gets knowing you are helping someone." As moral economy theorists of peasant societies (Scott 1976; Edelman 2005) have shown, the way people value food in the town of Tuta is as related to sociality as price.

Though Eduardo did engage in market transactions by selling produce to visitors, like his wife he preferred personalized exchanges. He claimed that his farm was more successful because of these exchange relationships, which combined market and non-market or barter transactions. One example that stands out is the relationship between Eduardo and one of his (illegal) buyers of mint. In exchange for the latter's continued business, Eduardo said that he "controlled" the mint-buyer's *mujer*. He made me understand that the mint-buyer had several *mujeres*, and that, in order to keep this secret, his wife would need to be "controlled" by invitations to the farm or other distractions. While the official account of productive work in Cuba is tied to social values like sovereignty, at the everyday level farmers engage in social relations to continue long-term relations as well as reap the benefits of their new position as small farmers. Producers of food may have an advantage in social exchanges, but the Tutaños I interacted with were all aware of the moral and political obligation to be generous and sociable, at least with everyone in their community.

## **Exchange**

Among the non-farming public there also seemed to be a fine line between true solidarity and the political requirement to help neighbors when they were in need. As Tutaños indicated, people were always watching others' behavior: "*La gente son chimosa*" (People are gossips). Clara (my Cuban "mother") told me this when someone asked her if she was buying beef from the street vendors for "the girl" (me). According to Clara, an affirmative answer to this question is dangerous as word might spread that one is buying beef illegally.

Because of this strong system of neighborhood watch, people such as Clara and Jorge (my Cuban “parents”) also felt an obligation to be sociable and giving to their neighbors, even if they did not otherwise feel close to them. When the neighbors in front of Clara’s house celebrated their daughter’s second birthday, Clara felt obligated to buy her a *vulgaria* (a little something) though she would not usually care to spend time with the family. Another day I heard Jorge and Clara whispering excitedly about something in the kitchen. Because the two are as close as family, I asked them what they were talking about. Clara responded:

We are talking about María [the next door neighbor]. She asks for everything! Today she asked for sugar, *which I had to buy* [in the CUC store; usually enough sugar is available via the neighborhood state store where quotas of cheap, basic food are distributed] ... They are asking us for things but they are better off [financially] than us!

Despite their hidden annoyance, my Cuban “parents” ended up giving María a bit of sugar.

While the political pressure to be sociable and generous may direct some neighborly actions, other forms of exchange reflect a cultural solidarity which does not stem entirely from conscious political obligation. As a woman of marriageable age, my initiation into Tutaño society would have been impossible unless I learned how to provision for the household, and this could not happen until I learned the location of houses or places where staple items such as tomato purée were sold legally and illegally. Knowledge about where to find foodstuffs was just as important as knowledge about people, as determinations of quality were based mostly on personal relationships rather than consumer choice. It mattered from whom one bought meat, for example. “Everyone” (*todo el mundo*) knew that *el chino* (the Chinese man) sold better quality meat at the market than *el gordo* (the fat man). In post-Soviet societies such as Cuba and Russia (as well as capitalist societies), “social relations ... are both a means to procure and exchange goods, and ... a means to evaluate the worth of goods” (Caldwell 2002: 299).

Anthropologists of post-socialist states such as Caroline Humphrey (1998) have argued that, in contexts where social relations of trust replace a generalized trust in the national currency, personal relations characteristic of barter override the “all-pervasive links of a monetary system” (cited by Trouillot 2001: 128). As in all centralized economies, supply-constrained (Verdery 1993: 174) consumers in Cuba survive mostly by working around the

system, and an essential element of social capital is acquiring information about where to find goods as well as people who may help in times of need (Humphrey 1998; Verdery 2003: 62). Constant communication about where one may find a second-grade item such as fodder “taken” from a factory floor, characterizes the “acquisitionmanship” (vs. “salesmanship”; Verdery 1993: 174) of such “economies of shortage” (Kornai 1980). Indeed, Cubanologist Anna Cristina Pertierra argues that personal relationships in consumption and exchange are more prevalent in socialist societies such as Cuba:

Consumers in all societies, whether socialist, capitalist or otherwise can be seen to cultivate personal relationships that defuse the social distance that trade is often seen to create. Nevertheless, the emphasis in socialist states on the state-managed distribution of goods does seem to have a particular counter-effect in that many socialist consumers value even more highly their personal networks as a resource to offset state-imposed constraints. (Pertierra 2007: 121)

As in our own globalized economy-society, credit-worthiness in everyday Cuban exchange is linked to trustworthiness in social exchange: “Individualism is predicated on the social order” (Hart 1986: 648). In Tuta, the criterion of trust in evaluating market traders is partly based on values embedded in nationalist ideas of community. Traders who charge too much money or sell poor-quality items at prices recognized as unfair are referred to as *abusadores* (abusers). By contrast, trusted *particulares* (traders) engage in the market sphere but do not place their own interests in money over the need to offer food at fair prices to their community. Like Jane Guyer’s example of gasoline sellers in Nigeria,<sup>4</sup> local idioms map out when and how to cross the line between collective morality and self-interest. My final example, which considers exchange as well as consumption, further illustrates this point.<sup>5</sup>

## **Consumption**

When one day I wanted to buy rum to drink with my Cuban family we had several choices:

- to buy a bottle of Havana Club™ in the hard currency store for \$3.25 CUCs (a significant amount for most Tutaños who usually earn about \$0.50 a day);

- to buy one from a man living nearby who periodically sold rum on the black market for the equivalent of \$1.75 CUCs in pesos (he could afford this). This rum was of a lower quality than Havana Club, but better than the final option;
- *La gasolina*, a very poor-quality rum (as the name implies) available from a neighbor.

Though my distinctions in quality of available rums may imply a one-to-one relationship between taste and socio-economic standing (Goody 1982; Bourdieu 1984 [1979]), this hierarchical scheme is not valid for the Cuban context in which I was situated. Indeed, though Jorge could have easily accepted my offer to buy the highest quality rum, he decided to bring back that of the lowest quality. I asked him his reasoning and he responded:

J: I could have got a bottle from a black market dealer [he had the money to do this], but I got this amount of *gasolina* because I worked for our neighbor down the street [the price of the Havana Club bottle placed it out of his range of choices].

M: Did you get paid to work for your neighbor?

J: No! One is not paid to help construct a neighbor's house ... Their *mujer* serves bread with egg, and you may get some rum, but you are not paid in *money*.

M: And this rum was also given to you for working?

J: Yes. We drank a bit there, but they gave me this too because I worked extra hard. It is not as nice as the others, but it is for *everyone*.

M: What do you mean?

J: This rum is cheap, it comes from *them* [the state]. Everyone can buy it. It is good because of this. And everyone got a bit of it at our neighbor's house, but I asked for a small bottle for tonight and worked harder. Now I know my neighbor will come and work for us when we need it.

In speaking of his act, Jorge cited José Martí: "The wine is sour, but it is *our* wine." This oft-quoted adage points to ideas and actions at play in both national and local moral economies. As with Jorge, Cubans with whom I interacted sometimes preferred the universal distribution of lower-quality goods to commodities bought in the market, especially if the objects in question implicated social relationships. As I have argued elsewhere (Wilson 2009: 37), the

prevalence of social over monetary or quality-based motivations for consumer behavior “call into question Veblenian assumptions about the universal desirability of ‘luxury’ goods” (Wilson 2009).

## **Conclusion**

Like the national moral economy in Cuba, which rests on ideas about the obligations and legitimate undertakings of state and citizens, the local moral economy in Tuta is linked to the interplay of rights and obligations between person and community. Cuban society is reproduced by the constant interplay of national and local levels, and this process involves both assimilation and contestation. As in Cuba, the production, exchange and consumption of food in all societies is a social event or performance, enacted for *particular* audiences and based on *particular* social rules for economic behavior. Economic anthropologists have used Karl Polanyi’s (2001 [1944]) ideas and later theorists to show that even modern economies cannot be entirely explained by the market principle, as “coeval” (Gregory 1997)—or co-present and possibly contradictory—schemes of valuation are always at play. In a similar vein, critics of utilitarian economists (e.g. Williams 1973; Sen 1977, 2002; Davis 2003, 2004) have argued that social motivations such as commitment (Sen 1977, 2002) should not be seen as exogenous to economic processes. As recent reactions to the latest economic crisis indicate, suppositions embedded in our own “global” economy are as value-laden as ever. The announcement of the credit crunch coupled with that of generous bonuses granted to a few top bankers, was, at least on my radio, met with calls for an “unselfish capitalism” and talk of “bringing morality back into banking.” More recently, the “Occupy” movement has spread across the globe as citizens demand their share of private and state-controlled assets.

What such “counter-cyclic” (Polanyi 2001 [1944]) reactions to our market model illustrate is that, like the Cuban communist model, the “science” (Myrdal 1953: 57) of our modern economy is just as related to values as it is to an affirmation or negation of the Law of Value. Indeed, we cannot assume that people really desire the kind of general welfare offered by the neoclassical model, premised as it is on the moral imperative to increase one’s consumption at all costs, and, inherently, to place the “sum total of happiness” above equal distribution (Myrdal 1953: 11, 41). But the opposite paradigm, weighed down on the collectivist side, is also inadequate, for categories and valuations set by each top-down model

tell only part of the story. As Anna Cristina Pertierra writes in response to Cuban “transitologists”:

A study of consumption that unquestioningly reproduces a capitalist fantasy that all Cuban consumers crave Nike and McDonald’s and dream of nothing more than moving to Miami, is as pointless to any genuine understanding of Cuban society as [is] a socialist fantasy that the revolution’s provision of hospitals and schools has somehow erased all Cubans’ desires for plentiful consumer commodities. (Pertierra 2007: 46–7)

While most economists rely on either/or (Shanin 1990: 86–91) ideological formulations (or, as current trends would suggest, artificial simulations)<sup>6</sup> to understand the way people choose to provision food and other commodities, anthropologists and other social scientists should look for the “residual components” (Dumont 1980 [1966]: 38–9) of historical ideas in everyday action.

**Marisa Wilson** is a lecturer in human geography at the University of the West Indies. Her principal research interests lie in political economic, moral and cultural ideas of food, ethical consumption and social justice at local, national and global scales, especially in regards to the uneven historical development of globalization. Her book, *Scalar Politics of Food in Cuba*, addresses the material and normative foundations of everyday food provisioning in a rural area of Cuba. Dr. Marisa Wilson, Department of Food Production, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus, Trinidad and Tobago ([marisawlsn@gmail.com](mailto:marisawlsn@gmail.com)) – this is the full mailing and email address.

## Notes

- 1 See, for example, Hart (1986), Parry and Bloch (1989), Dilley (1992), Gregory (1997), Sayer (2000), Graeber (2001), Leyshon *et al.* (2003), Williams *et al.* (2003), Maurer (2006), Fuller *et al.* (2010), North (2010), Samers and Pollard (2010), Seyfang (2010).
- 2 This is part of a case study (“Eduardo”) more thoroughly explained in Wilson (2010).
- 3 According to Guyer, in Nigeria there are locally-approved methods of earning a profit through sales of gasoline, but some forms of profit are considered



unacceptable. The word *ojúlówó* (“normal price” or “all who want can afford”) is morally distinct from *wón* (“expensive, scarce”), which, in turn, is contrasted with the very negative *ajeju* (“unnecessary profit, exploitation”), which is often associated with witchcraft (Guyer 2004: 104–5).

4 I have also referred to this ethnographic event in Wilson (2009b).

5 Here I am referring to the latest fad of behavioral economics, which arguably strays less far from the dominant liberal paradigm as advocates would suggest. To my knowledge, the very important epistemological and practical distinction between “irrational” economic behavior in the lab and that in social reality has not yet been dealt with in economic anthropology.

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